

The Originality of Japanese Contemporary Art

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日本現代美術の源流

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The Originality of Japanese Contemporary Art

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アレキサンドラ・モンローをゲストキュレーターに迎え、1994年に開催された展覧会「Japanese Art after 1945 : Scream against the Sky」展は、アメリカを巡回する初の大規模な日本の戦後前衛美術展となった。現在のアメリカにおける日本の現代文化全体に対する見方は、この展覧会による影響が大きい。この展覧会の中心として取り上げられた「具体美術協会」は、吉原治良を中心に嶋本昭三、白髪一雄、村上三郎、金山明、田中敦子、元永定正らによる前衛美術集団であった。本論では「具体美術協会」がパフォーマンスアートやハプニング、インスタレーションなど現代美術のさまざまな分野の先駆者として認められる点を検証しながら、さまざまな欧米美術家との関わりを探り、また、日本の現代美術の源流がどこにあるかを検証する。戦後日本の作家たちは、西欧に対していかに「日本」あるいは「東洋」を確立するかが、自らの存在に関わる根底的な問題であった。「具体美術協会」の作品を考察することによって、「日本」というアイデンティティの模索の歴史を再確認していく。

キーワード : the Gutai Group 具体美術協会, Jiro Yoshiwara 吉原治良, action painting アクションペインティング, Happenings ハプニング

I. Introduction

Japan's postwar artists have hated what they see as Western cultural imperialism. They've also fallen in love with the vulgarity and excess of American culture. Since the Gutai explosion, Japan's contemporary art has run fender with just about everyone else's. In the 1960's there were social protest works and obsessions with the human body, raucous figurative paintings in the 1980s and elaborate video installations in the 1990s. And this emulation business has been a two-way street.

The Guggenheim Museum SoHo survey of "Japanese Art After 1945 : Scream Against the

Sky" (1994-1995) aroused intense curiosity and some controversy. This first-ever major exhibition of Japanese modern art in the U.S. shows that many of today's art movements had their origins in Japan. The purpose here is to explore a little further into the first avant-garde movement, the Gutai group after World War II in Japan.

II. "Japanese Art After 1945 : Scream Against the Sky"

Whether those who are aficionados of modern art or merely curious beginners, this exhibition is a milestone. Such blockbuster exhibitions as "Japan des avant-gardes 1910-1970"¹⁾ in Paris, and "Against Nature : Japanese Art in

the Eighties"²⁾ which toured the U.S., were essential for grasping the fundamental elements of Japanese avant-garde art, movement offered information about artwork that gave rise to extraordinary phenomena. In impact and importance, the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo might be compared with the New York Armory Show in 1913 : modern art's first major show in the U.S. The American art world got their first look at artwork by Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky and Matisse. Furthermore, Duchamp's renowned *Nude Descending a Staircase* created a commotion.

In the catalog essay for the Japanese Art After 1945, the curator Alexandra Munroe said that "Modernism and the concept of avant-garde art are Western ideas that Japan received from abroad."³⁾ But just before the exhibition opened, she stated, "A lot of the work in the show might seem to look like American abstract expressionism and conceptual art, but it really comes out of another culture."⁴⁾ In fact, she is of two minds about this show. In other words, "this exhibition presents a significant argument that world-class art has been wrongly over-looked".⁵⁾

This exhibition engages me in dialogue. First, it asks what the originality of art is. In general, Zen, Wabi-Sabi, calligraphy and elements of Buddhism have been taken to explain Japanese art or to show relationships with more or less large areas of these artworks. Japanese art and these words might just be one of the partially successful approaches, but they might also bring in misleading analyses for Japanese art. Now we must reconsider the originality of Japanese modern art.

III. The Gutai and Japanese Modernism

"Anyone who regarded Japanese contemporary art as a watered-down version of Western

modernism has a surprise in store."⁶⁾ Many of the artists in the exhibition, especially the Gutai artists had been pioneers in styles, for example : conceptual art, performance art and body art, all of which "America and Europe tend to claim as their own"⁷⁾. Especially, the Gutai group was frequently cited as the first truly radical postwar art movement in Japan. Its performance-centered works, theatrical events and multimedia environments had enormous influence on both Japan and other countries, primarily through photo-documentation in a periodical that was the group's first production and gave the Gutai group its name. The *Gutai* Japanese-English magazine, which ran for twelve issues between 1955 and 1965, helped to introduce their artworks abroad and led to a series of their exhibitions.⁸⁾ There was no doubt that in Europe, the periodical was instrumental in initiating an exchange between the Japanese and European avant-gardes.

The effect of Japanese modernism was "a bit more than a time-lag appropriation of Western art works. This was a real tense time period as they tried to resolve itself here."⁹⁾ In the early 1950's, a boom of international loan exhibitions began in Japan. According to Munroe, until 1954, "the *Salon de mai* survey of contemporary French painting and one-person shows of works by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, George Rouault, and Ossip Zadkine all traveled to Japan. Rapid, successive exposure to contemporary art was also facilitated by a deluge of international and domestic art magazines that were available after years of censorship."¹⁰⁾ Munroe quoted a comment by a Japanese critic, Shuzo Takiguchi in order to indicate the Japanese artists had been starved of Western modern art:

Perhaps we haven't completely digested the movements and principles of Western art.

Japanese contemporary art must exist in our guts and bones. This is where everything begins. Is it possible that we do not yet understand our very own substance?¹¹⁾

As Takiguchi stated above, “starting from zero” was no academic theory, but everyday imperative. A traumatic shock was seared into the consciousness of the people of Japan by two atomic bombs. At the same time, “Japanese postwar artists hated what they saw in Western cultural imperialism. They also fell in love with the vulgarity and excess of American culture”¹²⁾. Consequently, they veered between trying to revive and make art, for instance : traditional ceramics, and “art with dripped paint or Coca-Cola logos.”¹³⁾

Munroe stated that Jiro Yoshiwara, founder of the 1950's ground-breaking Gutai movement, “promoted a bold and spirited anti-academicism”¹⁴⁾ Yoshiwara exhorted its followers to “Create what has never existed before!” Yoshiwara, also stated this vision in the first issue of the *Gutai* magazine, “The art of the present represents freedom for those living in this severe time.... Our profound wish is to concretely prove that our spirits are free.”¹⁵⁾ He defined art-making as the symbolization of freedom, an individual soul, a destructive rite to create something new.¹⁶⁾ The group was founded in 1954 by artists proclaiming their freedom from the oppressive Japanese government during World War II . It was based in Nishinomiya city (Hyogo prefecture) in the western region of Japan. “The noun *gutai* literally means ‘concreteness’ ... Using this name, Gutai signified concrete enactments of individual character, emotion, and thought in opposition to cerebral and abstract aesthetics.”¹⁷⁾ The Gutai artists sought radical new means for expressing the historical crisis.

Some artists took abstract expressionism and pushed it further into space. They applied paint with their bare feet, broke bottles on canvas and even painted with remote-control devices. “As apolitical and anarchic, they melded Western and Eastern thinking and set both gently askew”, said the critic Holland Cotter in the *New York Times*.¹⁸⁾ The artworks of Kazuo Shiraga remind us of both Zen notions of chance and action paintings when he threw away his brushes and began to paint Pollock-like (fig. 1) abstractions with his feet.¹⁹⁾ (fig. 2). On the other hand, he anticipates postmodernist preoccupation with bizarre media in his painting incorporating bore hide in his canvas. Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric dress* (1956) (fig. 3), a kind of ritual wear made of colored electric lights and bells, which includes an electronic

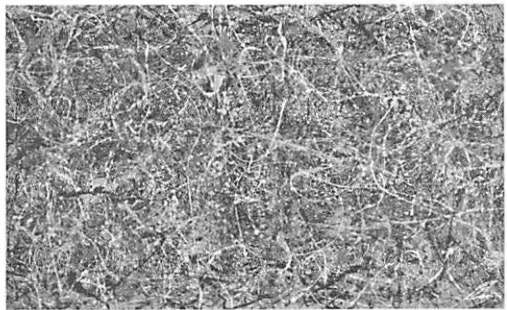


Fig. 1 Jackson Pollock *No.1*, (1949)



Fig. 2 Kazuo Shiraga, painting with feet, the 2nd Gutai Art Exhibition, Tokyo (1956)



Fig. 3 Atsuko Tanaka, *Electric Dress*, the 2nd Gutai Art Exhibition, Tokyo (1956)

switching system to control the individual bulbs and "seems to be a witty emblem of both the lure and the danger of technology".²⁰⁾ Cotter said, in his review, that the wearer looked fantastic and very sophisticated but risked electrocution.²¹⁾

IV. The Gutai as an Influential Pioneer of Contemporary Art

The Gutai group was an influential pioneer to the late 1950's happenings and performance arts of the 1960's, a fact acknowledged by Allan Kaprow (fig. 4) in "his important 1965 book *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings*."²²⁾ Kaprow wrote that "I did not know of the Gutai movement until 1959 and did not see photographs of their events until 1963".²³⁾

The Gutai group anticipated the Happenings and performance art of New York. "Their activities were stated in an article entitled 'Japanese Innovators' by Ray Falk, which reported how the Gutai artists brought action into their artwork, turning it into theater."²⁴⁾ Eighteen members of the Gutai group exhibited twenty-eight paintings as the sixth Gutai exhibition at Martha Jackson Gallery, New York in the fall of 1958, and these Gutai exhibitions traveled to other American venues.²⁵⁾ The seventh Gutai exhibition in 1959 was held in Turin, initiating a long-lasting appreciation of Gutai work in Italy. The Gutai exhibitions were consequently held in Austria, France, Holland and Germany during the 1960's.²⁶⁾ As late as 1965-67, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized "The New Japanese Painting and Sculpture," which included many Gutai artists and the show toured seven other U.S. museums.²⁷⁾

Thanks to an endeavor of French critic, Michel Tapié, the Gutai group received considerable recognition. He championed the Gutai group to defend his own theories of *l'informel* as an

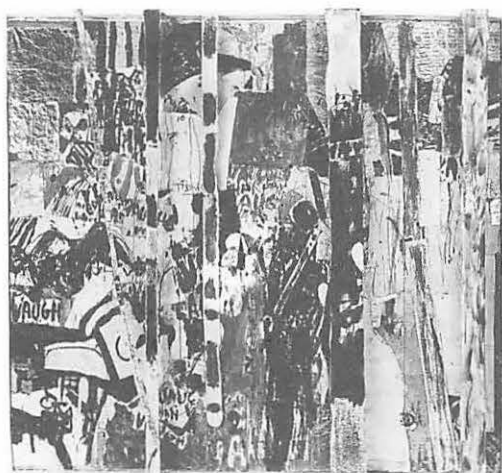


Fig. 4 Alan Kaprow, *Baby*, (1956)

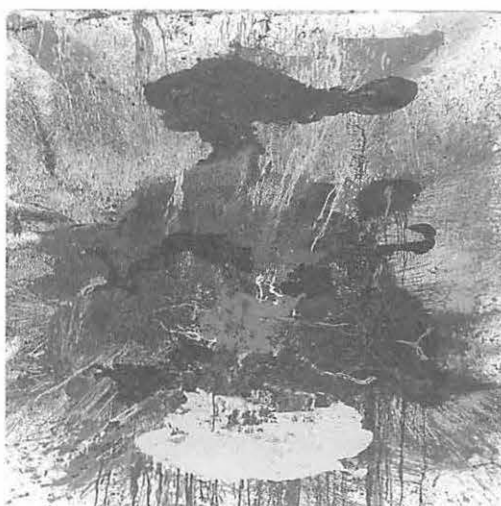


Fig. 5 Shozo Shimamoto, *Work*, (1958)

international art movement—ideas which had been seen in his book, *Un Art Autre : où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel* published in Paris in 1952.²⁸⁾

The group's connections with Japanese calligraphy and the techniques of that medium are essential in links with new types of paintings. For example, Shozo Shimamoto (fig. 5), Akira Kanayama (fig. 6), Yasuo Sumi, Saburo Murakami, and Kazuo Shiraga investigated with performance methods of making paintings that were inspired by calligraphy.²⁹⁾ In addition, “the technique of action paintings derived from Jackson Pollock was well known in Japan through Hans Namuth's photographs of *Life* magazine and the Japanese art magazines.”³⁰⁾ The French artist Georges Mathieu (fig. 7) also appeared as a more theatrical painter in Japanese art magazines. When he visited Japan with Tapié in 1957, he dressed in a kimono and gave action painting events in the display windows of department stores in Tokyo and Osaka.³¹⁾ Many Gutai artists extended their painting techniques inspired from these Western approaches, at the same time, they were also indebted to techniques of

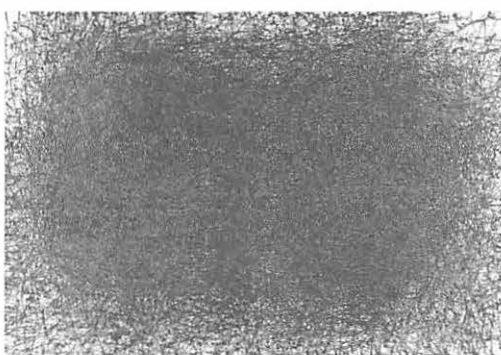


Fig. 6 Akira Kanayama, *Work*, (1958)



Fig. 7 Georges Mathieu, *Homege to the Constable of Bourbon*, (1959)

esoteric Japanese and Chinese calligraphers, who have been known to apply ink by splutting or by using someone's hair as a brush. Many of the Gutai members were action artists, like their New York abstract expressionist counterparts,

not just framing personal body gestures, but going beyond them : painting with their feet for example. Setting down his canvas of dribbles and drips, Kanayama went beyond Jackson Pollock not through wrist flicks, but by attaching his brush to a small toy robot. Murakami hurled glass jars of paint against rocks in front of canvas : we can see shards of glass embedded in the paint.

Shozo Shimamoto was inspired by an early encounter with artworks of Zen artist-monk Nantenbo Toju (1839-1926) (fig. 8). Yoshiwara often took fellow members of the Gutai group to see Nantenbo's famous *fusuma* paintings at the Kaisei Temple in Nishinomiya. Shimamoto was shocked by Nantenbo's large works which had been executed with an oversize, heavy brush that re-quired all the artist's energy to act. Since Nantenbo had completed the sequence of strokes in each ideogram, the weight of black ink and his energy caused huge splashes of ink to be thrown across the surface, making a visible record of his physical struggle with his materials.³²⁾

Shimamoto attempted to incorporate the factors of time, space and their interaction—the idea of the artwork as a locus of the movement of the body—into his artwork in various ways.³³⁾ His early artwork such as *Hole* of ca. 1950 represents a record of the powerful motions of the artist : he pierced the surface of the paper with a pencil again and again.³⁴⁾ His later paintings, such as *work* of 1960, and some related photo-documented events took this action orientation a stage further by underlining a random painting process. Like Mura-kami, Shimamoto flung a bottle filled with enamel paint against a rock located in the center of a large sheet of canvas : the resulting painting involved impact-generated sprays of viscous paint in which glass fragments were embedded.³⁵⁾ (fig. 9)

The founder of the Gutai group, Yoshiwara

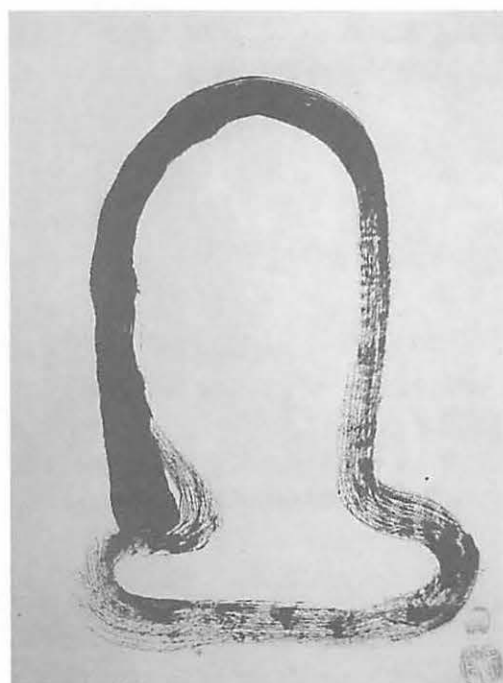


Fig. 8 Nantenbo, Ink Paintings of *Daruma*

was the most conventional abstract painter in it. Munroe said of Yoshiwara, "his interests remained more formal and spiritual. Besides his abiding interest in modern European abstraction, he was actively involved with Shiryu Morita and the avant-garde calligraphy movement".³⁶⁾ Shiryu Morita was also influenced by Nantenbo whom I mentioned before. After 1962, Yoshiwara tended to concentrate on executing a series of circle paintings stimulated by Zen notion for ten years. (fig. 10) This artwork "represents void and substance, emptiness and completion, and the union of painting, calligraphy, and meditation ... In the tradition of Zen monk-artists, Yoshiwara repeatedly practiced his circle paintings as a form of spiritual discipline while pursuing the realization of a perfect form of modern abstract painting"³⁷⁾ :

I am grateful that however big the space is, I

know that one circle can fill it, will complete the picture. It save me from having to think what to draw on every canvas. I am only left with dealing with what kind of circle will be made. Or, with what kind of circle I will make.... It is up to me as to whether I have come to an understanding with my circles and myself.³⁸⁾

A primary motive behind the Gutai group's assimilation of Eastern and Western ideas, as well as behind the group's earnest recognition of the theory of l'informel that Tapié championed for them, was the desire to be seen as energetic participants in an international art world. On the other hand, most of postwar Japanese artists often followed the Western art styles. "The Japanese themselves were worried about being provincial, at the same time, were looking for their own identity as artists : some ambitious artists, such as On Kawara chose to live outside Japan".³⁹⁾ But this is not the whole story. "Japanese culture also equipped artists with means to infuse certain general themes of international postwar art with great conviction".⁴⁰⁾ Some art critics commented that Japanese art just followed Western art until now. But, perhaps we can say that the Gutai group's ideas were simultaneous with Western avant-garde movements and that the Gutai artists were drawing from their own culture rather than adopting foreign modes of art movements.

During 1950's and early 60's, many Japanese artists and critics discussed the relationship between Western contemporary art and Japanese art. After some survey blockbuster exhibitions of Western contemporary art were held in Japan, the debate appeared prominently.⁴¹⁾ The enormous artwork of Tapié, Kline (fig. 11), Mathieu, Pollock and Sam Francis were gathered in "The International Art of New Era : Informel and Gutai" in 1958 and were displayed with artwork



Fig. 9 Shozo Shimamoto, executing a painting by throwing bottles of paint, the 2nd Gutai Art Exhibition, Tokyo (1956)

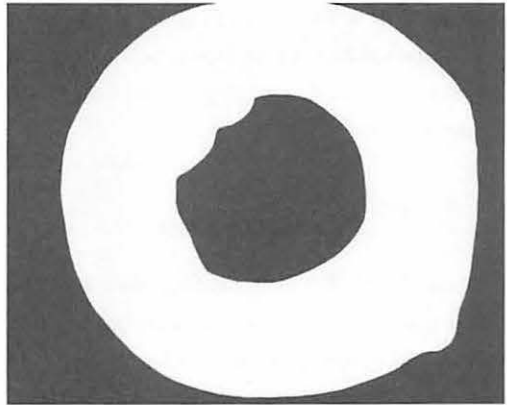


Fig. 10 Jiro Yoshiwara, *White on Black*, (1965)

of the Gutai artists.⁴²⁾ Simultaneously Japanese art magazines published artists such as Kline, Motherwell, Mason, Pollock, Soulages and Tobey, correctly or not, as being influenced by Japanese art and its thought.⁴³⁾ We should notice that Japanese art has parallels Western contemporary art of the time. Under these conditions, the Gutai group artists were able to grasp and develop it. The curator, Munroe identified the Gutai group as



Fig. 11 Yves Klein, *Untitled Anthropometry (ANT 106)*, (1960)

follows:

While debates about the nature of Gutai art are far from resolved, Gutai's radical achievements in the context of Japanese modernism are now recognized as historical fact. Not coincidentally, Gutai's overdue recognition as Japan's primary 'original avant-garde movement' has occurred as part of a national revisionist effort to establish a history of Japanese modernism independent from the Euro-American narrative.⁴⁴⁾

V. Conclusion

After World War II, the prominence of the Gutai group helped other Japanese artists find "fresh and rough-hewn ways of working"⁴⁵⁾ in postwar Japanese culture. In the 1960's and 70's, there were expressions of "anti-art, inter-media, conceptual, and metaphysical art forms."⁴⁶⁾ In addition, there were new paintings and sculptures in the 1980's and video installations and computer-generated artworks in the 1990's. The Gutai artists broke their conventional identity and established their own identity as international art movement.⁴⁷⁾ The Gutai artists left clues for followers to set up a vital exchange between Japan and the West. While searching for a contemporary identity, the Gutai artists, by inspiring Western avant-garde ideas into Japanese notion, turned the

wasteland into a rich field in the art world.

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